

*Recalling a CIA Officer's Sacrifice***John Kearns and the Cold War in Laos (S)****Kenneth Michael Absher**

Editor's Note: This article brings to life the story of one of CIA's silent heroes, honored by a Star on the Memorial Wall. (U)

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John Kearns served two tours in Laos as a CIA paramilitary (PM) officer during the war in Indochina. By the end of 1972, Agency officers in Laos were guiding and supporting 40,000 (b)(1) Laotian regular troops in operations that (b)(3)(c) down elements of at least four (b)(3)(n) divisions of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), preventing them from joining the war against the South Vietnamese government and allied US forces. In direct support of US foreign policy, these CIA officers confronted intense combat with the NVA on an almost daily basis. While this article focuses on Kearns, who was killed in December 1972, it is a tribute to the courage and dedication of all CIA personnel and their families who served their country during the war in Indochina. It also reminds us that today's PM officers are the guardians of a legacy of courage, sacrifice, and honor bequeathed by those who served before.¹ (S)

Born in 1942, John Wesley Kearns III grew up in Texas and joined the US Army Special Forces out of high school. Like many young men in his generation, he was posted to Vietnam, where he earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge for

coming under enemy fire. He returned home in 1965 and completed a degree in geography and economics at North Texas State University. Upon graduation, Kearns joined the CIA on contract as a PM officer. After ten months of intensive training, he was assigned to Vientiane Station, Laos, as a PM contract operations officer in June 1969. (S)

The Strategic Chessboard (U)

Following World War II, as anti-colonial winds began to blow through much of the underdeveloped world and Mao Tse-tung drove Chung Kai-shek and the Nationalists out of mainland China, communist-inspired Vietminh guerrillas in Indochina began to agitate for independence from France. Determined to keep Indochina out of communist hands, President Truman provided financial and logistical support to the French in Southeast Asia.² (U)

The Geneva Accords of July 1954 attempted to resolve the Indochina conflict by calling for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnam was partitioned along the 17th parallel, leaving the Vietminh in *de facto* control of the north. Although not an official participant in Geneva, the United States warned that “it would view any renewal of aggression in violation

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¹ This article is based on research in CIA personnel files, review of daily combat intelligence reports from Laos, and interviews with 12 people knowledgeable about John Kearns's career and Agency activities in Laos in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (S)

² For this and subsequent references to the origin and evolution of the Vietnam conflict, see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994). (U)

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As time went on, the Agency found itself guiding and supporting 40,000 irregular troops, about half of whom were tribesmen from northern Laos.

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of the aforesaid arrangements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security.” In response to the opportunity for repatriation allowed under the Geneva Accords, some 80,000 to 100,000 communist sympathizers moved north, while one million North Vietnamese fled south.³ (U)

North Vietnam launched a guerrilla war against South Vietnam in 1959, infiltrating men and supplies via Laos and Cambodia. Over 6,000 North Vietnamese troops moved into Laos to protect the logistics routes into South Vietnam and to support the communist Pathet Lao, waging a guerrilla war against the non-communist government in Vientiane. (U)

Inheriting the policy positions of his predecessors, President Kennedy judged Indochina to be the decisive battleground that would determine whether communist-led guerrilla wars could be stopped and the Cold War won. At a press conference on 23 March 1961, Kennedy warned: “The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all—in a real neutrality observed by all.”⁴ (U)

The CIA in Laos (S)

According to Ted Shackley, who was Chief of Station (COS) in Laos from 1966-1968, the CIA began its involvement on the ground in Laos in January 1961 with the recruitment of a force of 1,000 irregulars, mostly Meo (Hmong) tribesmen. By March, the force had grown to

4,000. As time went on, the Agency found itself guiding and supporting 40,000 irregular troops, about half of whom were tribesmen from northern Laos. From 1963 to 1966, after the communist Pathet Lao pulled out of a coalition government in Vientiane, CIA efforts in Laos focused on the northern provinces. US policy required that the Agency-led irregulars control enough of the population centers and land in northern Laos to allow the Royal Lao Government to negotiate with the Pathet Lao from a position of strength. The war in the north was a war of position and maneuver—ebb and flow. The non-communist side was best in the rainy season; the Pathet Lao and its backers, the NVA, were better in the dry season. The CIA-led irregulars fought hard enough during the early 1960s to keep elements of two NVA divisions tied down in the north. (S)

In 1965, the CIA received approval to open a second front. The war in the north was to continue, but action was to be stepped up in southern Laos to contribute more directly to the war in South Vietnam. The irregulars were to be used to impede NVA movement through the panhandle of Laos to supply and reinforce the communist Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam. The irregulars were to collect intelligence on the material that Hanoi was transporting through the

panhandle, destroy it when possible, and pin down NVA troops in the area to keep them from moving into South Vietnam. (S)

_____ranner than
being assigned to particular units, CIA case officers in Laos were responsible for specific sectors—they went wherever action occurred in their sector. (S)

In 1970, the Department of Defense began to spend funds directly in support of CIA operations in Laos. John Eisenhower, who worked in the policy office of the Secretary of Defense from 1969 to 1971, recalls money being transferred overtly and directly from the DoD budget. (b)(1)

_____This was (b)(3)(c)
_____ (b)(3)(n)
taking place at about the same time as the overall drawdown of US forces in Vietnam. Illustrating the pivotal role that Laos continued to play in Southeast Asia, a note seen by a CIA officer in 1971 carried the declaration, “Long Tieng [in northern Laos] must not fall.” It was initiated by President Nixon. (S)

Kearns's First Tour (U)

John Kearns spent his first year in Laos as a paramilitary operations officer

³ Kissinger, p. 636 (U)
⁴ As quoted in Kissinger, p. 646 (U)

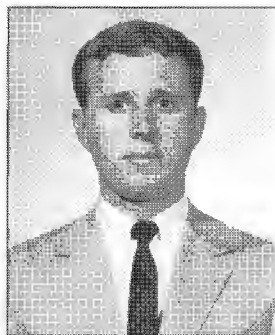
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Kearns sent action teams against North Vietnamese installations deep in enemy-held territory.

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John Wesley Kearns (U) (C) (N) photo (U)

responsible for all of the irregular
forces and intelligence teams in the
area.

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According to the testimony of his
managers, Kearns showed a genuine
respect for the Laotian people and
a concern for their well-being.
Early on, he demonstrated a leader-
ship ability that enabled him to
motivate his men to undertake diffi-
cult and dangerous assignments.
From all indications, he wrote clear
reports, worked hard, and estab-
lished good relationships with
colleagues. (U)

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(b)(1)
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in this
capacity, he was deeply involved in
high-priority, special operations to
send action teams against North
Vietnamese installations deep in
enemy-held territory. He oversaw
all phases of these operations—
planning, training, team leadership
and motivation, command and con-
trol, and post-mission debriefing
and analysis. According to his
superior, he was discovered in his
leadership role, command func-
tions, and directed his location
assets with quiet self-confidence.
(U)

Kearns demonstrated personal
courage on several occasions
during this period. Once, despite
suffering a high fever from malaria,
he insisted on conducting danger-
ous terrain to support one of his
teams in securing a helicopter land-
ing zone for a major troop
infiltration behind enemy lines. On
another occasion, in June 1971,
Kearns volunteered to try a cable-
hoisting from a helicopter in search
for the missing crew of a crashed
C-47 aircraft. Dense foliage had
prohibited a ground search. He
made it down, but only had ten
minutes on the ground due to his
helicopter's shortage of fuel. Dur-
ing that time he observed the
aircraft's body, inspected the point of
the fuselage that could be entered
and called out in vain for survivors.
(U)

Back to Langley (U)

Kearns was selected for lateral
entry into the Civil Service
Career Staff on 5 October 1971. He
returned to CIA headquarters.

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He completed the Basic
Classroom Operations course. Most
weekends, he drove to Dallas to see
his fiancée, [redacted] who he
first met at North Texas State Uni-
versity. John had insisted that Kathy
receive her own degree before they
were married. She received her BA
in History and English in Decem-
ber 1971, and they were married in
Dallas on Christmas Eve (U)

(b)(3)(c)
(b)(6)

In August 1972, Kearns and his
new wife were posted back to
Langley. Initially, he was assigned to
Long Term in northern Laos as an
operations officer. Another officer
was already in the Com-
munications Raider slot. However,
relegating Kearns to being the
assistant to someone holding the
position he had formerly held him-
self. He sought another job and

He was immediately caught
in a major Agency effort to counter the
(b)(1) extensive offensive yet under-
(b)(3)(c) by the North Vietnamese
(b)(3)(n) against the Vietnam (U)

The Easter Offensive (U)

On 30 March 1972, Hanoi launched
a major military action, known as
the Easter Offensive, to take advan-
tage of a shift in U.S. strategy.
Under President Nixon's Vietnam

The task force was created after a decision
by the government to maintain the
southern (U)

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(b)(1)
(b)(3)(c) [redacted]
(b)(3)(n) [redacted] save in looking the [redacted]
[redacted] against the NVA. The task
force chief recalls that one of the
[redacted] case officers had a family emergency
[redacted]

At times this resulted in beams being assigned to the field almost every day. According to his supervisor, the preferred field to staying (b)(1) behind in (b)(3)(c) was the (b)(3)(n) selected field. A close friend of shared living quarters with some (b)(3)(n) described him as one of the "Young Turks" at Los who admired to take the flight directly to the enemy, the NVA, is (b)(3)(n)

other (b)(1) than [redacted]
 also (b)(3)(c), call in retrospect by
 sup (b)(3)(c) [redacted]

(b)(3)(n)
(b)(3)(c)
(b)(3)(n)

THREE (3) copies delivered
 (b)(1) using an address
 (b)(3)(c) s. most of whom
 were also operated out of
 (b)(3)(n)

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(b)(1)
(b)(3)(c)
(b)(3)(n)

There were days when all (b)(1) officers, including the team (b)(3)(c), to be is, the field. Non (b)(3)(c) involved only day (b)(3)(n) up. They almost always used batter arrest or help orders, sometimes paying by

An aerial photograph of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001. The towers are visible, with smoke rising from the base of the North Tower. The surrounding area includes the World Trade Center complex and the surrounding city of New York City. The image is marked with redaction codes: (b)(3)(n) at the top, and (b)(1), (b)(3), and (b)(3) on the right side.

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(b)(3)(c)
(b)(3)(n)

(b)(1)
 (b)(1) (b)(3)(c)
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All of Kermis's supervisors describe him as a highly capable, reliable case officer who exercises good judgment and gets along well with everyone. He loved his work and tended to be quiet and unassuming, but was definitely

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(c)
(b)(3)(n)**The Pakse Battlefield (U)**

During the early summer of 1972

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the NVA had advanced to within 12 kilometers of the town and appeared determined to keep the irregular forces settled in there. The units of Task Force Phasank broke out, however, and began to push the NVA back along Route 26 toward Pakse, a town located 52 kilometers to the east on the strategic Bokeo Plateau. The plateau overlooked the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the communists' resupply route between North Vietnam and the war zone in the south. For some time, the Agency had placed road watchers on the plateau to gather intelligence on the movement of NVA troops and supplies. Now, the push of the thousands of irregulars in Task Force Phasank toward Pakse presented a new and more significant threat to the NVA. From the plateau, the US-led irregulars could not only monitor movement along the trail, but also attack supply trains with mortar and artillery fire (U).

The NVA counterattacked in August, the month that Komsols arrived. They shot down a two-engine jet near Pakse, ambushed an

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He directed counter-battery fire . . . and supervised as much of the evacuation of the wounded by helicopter as he could before being evacuated himself.

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irregular battalion some 13 kilometers east of Pakse, and began to use 105mm rockets, a weapon not usually used by the NVA in south Laos. NVA attacks, including the use of tanks, continued at a high level against irregular forces deployed along Route 23 east of Pakse. Casualties on both sides mounted. Captured documents indicated that the NVA understood that the strategic objective of the irregular units and Laotian government forces was to force the NVA to withdraw manpower from combat in South Vietnam to guard their

flank in Laos. Nonetheless, Hanoi apparently felt it had no choice but to commit some 2,000 additional infantry and tank troops to try to prevent the capture of Pakse (U//NF).

Operation A Second Front
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(b)(3)(c) while the (b)(3)(n)
(b)(3)(c) we (b)(3)(n)g with (b)(3)(n)
(b)(3)(c) 10 kilometers east of (b)(3)(n)
(b)(3)(c) period a second front (b)(3)(n)
(b)(3)(c) began with the arrival (b)(1)
(b)(3)(c) of two Douglas C-47s to a (b)(3)(c)
(b)(3)(n) 5 kilometers southwest of the (b)(3)(c)
(b)(3)(n) central town of Saravali, (b)(3)(n)

located in a valley north of the Bolovens Plateau, nearly 100 kilometers northeast of Pakse. Saravali sat astride an important junction of rivers and highways used by the NVA to send troops and supplies into South Vietnam and Cambodia.



Troops are shown in preparation falling into South Vietnamese tanks (U)

The CIA left them caught the NVA completely off guard. They had committed considerable manpower to protecting Paksoong against Tasa Force Phoenix. Now they faced sinking additional forces to head off the capture of Suavane. (C)

After fighting broke to a lull along the route of advance, the *Changos Mobiles* secured Savane on 27 October. The NVA counterattacked, continuously shelling the irregulars on the night of 1-2 November. On 15 November, NVA battalions succeeded in recapturing Savane. According to CIA reporting, the entire civilian population withdrew with the irregulars. Tactician strikes caused heavy damage to enemy troops in the town, and irregular forces engaged the remaining NVA troops as they left.

The town after the strikes. Casualties were heavy on both sides. According to Agency officers involved, Hanoi had committed over 2,000 troops to the recapture of Savane. On 21 November, however, three GM battalions (1,200 men) reentered the town. The situation remained fluid in the area as NVA units constantly shifted in anticipation of action by Lacham government and irregular forces. (C)

Back at Paksoong

Along Route 28 east of Paksoong, irregular units were experiencing a series of shellings and probes. (b)(1) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n) saved more than 150 rounds of good mortar, grenade, and rocket

fire. Then, beginning on 21 November, new NVA units moved into the Lee Ngai area near Paksoong. (C)

On 25 November, while the NVA was fighting for control of Savane, the CIA arranged for the build of almost 1,500 GM irregulars in an area 18 kilometers north of Paksoong. Once again the NVA was caught off guard by a significant movement of troops directed by (b)(1) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n). On the following day, these irregulars began moving south toward the town. Three battalions of (b)(1) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n) were added to the force moving on Paksoong. Resistance increased. On 3 December the NVA sent tanks into the area, but initial tank strikes were called in against them. Finally on 6 December, GM forces took control of Paksoong. Within days the irregulars also commanded the strategic high ground immediately east of the town. (C)

Over the next few weeks, the situation around Paksoong remained fluid. Sporadic clashes indicated that the NVA had not encircled the area. On 15 December, Kearns was on the ground near Paksoong supervising the infiltration of several hundred placement troops for a (b)(1) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n) between exhausted (b)(1) (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(n) and who had arrived on the scene by helicopter. At 1900 hours eight rounds of 82mm mortar fire impacted near a battalion of Thai irregulars. Fourteen 15 more rounds slammed in. A G-17 "Spooky" gunship silenced the suspected mortar positions, but there were casualties. Among them, John Kearns. (S)

Although Kearns was severely wounded in the mortar attack, he

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The efforts of Agency officers in Laos were . . . an important part of our nation's . . . ultimate victory in the Cold War.

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directed counter-battery fire, led others to safety, and supervised as much of the evacuation of the wounded by helicopter as he could before being evacuated himself, his operations assistant reported.

Kearns died en route to the hospital. A mortar fragment had pierced his aorta. (S)

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Denouement (U)

CIA-supported action continued in the Paksong/Saravane area for several weeks after Kearns's death. While Task Force Phasouk and GM irregulars were securing Paksong, an NVA battalion launched a counterattack against the Laotian irregulars holding Saravane. Under the cover of hundreds of mortar rounds, the NVA gained a foothold in the northern half of the town and then launched a massive assault. NVA pressure was relentless, including the shelling of one key GM position with 5,500 rounds of mortar, howitzer, rocket, tank, and recoilless rifle fire, according to CIA field reporting. The irregulars were forced to withdraw in the second week of January. (C)

Despite the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973, the enemy increased its military activity in Laos. Following the recapture of Saravane, Hanoi sent additional troops against the irregulars securing the Pakse-Paksong corridor. On 8 February, a heavy NVA barrage and infantry assaults forced a disorderly retreat from Paksong—over 500 irregulars deserted their units that night and fled back to Pakse. The Agency was able to stabilize several of the GM units, however, and they recaptured Paksong on 12 February. The town remained in non-communist hands as the ceasefire finally began

to take hold in March and a general calm settled over southern Laos. (C)

In the Final Analysis (U)

CIA officers and their irregular forces fought elements of at least four and possibly five NVA divisions in Laos. In their efforts to retain control over the strategic Laotian towns of Paksong and Saravane, the NVA had committed nine battalions from two different divisions against the CIA-led irregulars. Troops from a third NVA division were also reported in southern Laos toward the end of 1972. During the same timeframe, the irregulars in northern Laos confronted units of two more mainline NVA Divisions. (C)

During the Easter Offensive, the enemy suffered more than 100,000 casualties in its attacking force of 200,000—including possibly 40,000 killed. They lost more than half of their tanks and heavy artillery. The anticipated general uprising of the South Vietnamese people in support of the communists failed to occur. North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap later was removed as commander of the North Vietnamese Army, almost certainly in part because of the failed Easter Offensive.¹² (U)

¹² Sorley, pp. 339-340. (U)

In the communist onslaught, the South Vietnamese lost more than 8,000 killed, some 24,000 wounded, and nearly 3,000 missing. These casualties almost certainly would have been greater if the CIA-supported irregulars had not diverted and engaged so many NVA units in Laos, substantially impeding Hanoi's ability to reinforce its divisions in South Vietnam.¹³ (S)

It took three years for Hanoi to recover sufficiently from these losses to mount another major offensive. After the Paris Peace Accords were signed, the North Vietnamese began to rebuild their army and resupply their troops, which were allowed to remain in place in the south under the terms of the Accords. South Vietnam came under communist rule in April 1975, followed soon thereafter by Cambodia and Laos. (U)

Hanoi won the battle for South Vietnam in the arena of American public opinion, not on the ground. America's Armed Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency left Indochina with their courage, integrity, and professionalism intact. They would be needed in the battles that were to come—in Afghanistan, Grenada, Panama, and Iraq. The sacrifices and efforts of the men and women who served in Laos were not in vain. They were an important part of our nation's overall effort as we moved forward

¹³ The author, who was the CIA Province-Of-Ficer-In-Charge in Kien Giang Province in South Vietnam from June 1972 to March 1973, recalls being the beneficiary of the efforts of the CIA irregulars in Laos. POW interrogations in September 1972 revealed that the 1st NVA Division, which had been attacking in both Kien Giang and Chau Doc Provinces in the Vietnamese Delta, was reduced to substantially less than half its strength—fewer than 1,500 men—largely because of the difficulty in receiving reinforcements. (S)

from victories on the (b)(1) field to
the ultimate victory (b)(3)(c)d
War. (S) (b)(3)(n)
(b)(6)

Postscript (U)

John Kearns was awarded the Intel-
ligence Star posthumously. [redacted]

[redacted]
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